

KATE WERBLE

Laurel Sparks

Time Machines

March 14 – April 27, 2024

PRESS RELEASE

Kate Werble Gallery is thrilled to present Laurel Sparks' exhibition *Time Machines*, her third solo exhibition at the gallery. The essay for the press release was commissioned in honor of the show by two of Sparks' friends and colleagues, Susan L. Aberth and Jesse Bransford:

Laurel Sparks: Time Machines is a dazzling and seductive series of paintings from an artist long known to imbue her abstract work with a numinous aura. Utilizing her signature style of woven canvas grids and geometric forms, amplified and disrupted by passages of glitter, paper pulp relief and embedded trinkets, Sparks strategically merges the queer aesthetics of the disco with ritual magic. *Time Machines* is her invitation to step outside normal time and space in order to experience the temporal from a more visual and bodily standpoint.

The woven canvas grid of her surfaces is a re-inscription into modern art of weavings' magical origins. In many creation myths, culture and even reality itself is created as women weave and tell stories, e.g. the Greek Fates or the Norse Norns. When thinking of grids, what comes to mind are the Theosophical origins of Piet Mondrian's paintings where horizontal (feminine) and vertical (masculine) energies were woven together into a psychic stasis. Like Mondrian, Sparks' grid seeks to unify opposites into an integrated and harmonious whole – think of his joyous irreverence in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43). The haunted Bauhaus^[1] is also here – Johannes Itten, Annie Albers, Paul Klee and their later offspring, Alfred Jensen and Agnes Martin. Woven with ritual intention, Sparks employs a canvas grid of seven strips, a number with manifold magical correspondences, in order to stabilize “binary tensions.”

Laurel Sparks' use of color, material, and techniques reference numerous historical esoteric systems ranging from the nineteenth century through to contemporary times. Most notable in this series of eight paintings is her use of colors and shapes based on magical correspondences with numbers, cycles of the moon, days of the week and month with their planetary and numerical associations. Such complex systems date back to the origins of modern day magical practice in nineteenth century Europe, most notably in the British esoteric group the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Sight, image, color and material were all deeply embedded in these traditions, but also sight *beyond*. It was this notion of beyond that deeply motivated the Golden Dawn whose rituals and theories would blend together to create a powerful and syncretic system of color. Taking full advantage of the symbolic implications of this color system, Sparks teases out patterns and confluences in the procession of the sun, moon, planets and stars – the latent matrix of our contemporary calendar. From its beginning, women artists have been associated with this color system (known as the “Queen's scale”) and the color charts created by Moira Mathers, Ithell Colquhoun, and Steffi Grant have influenced generations of artists - think Harry Smith's *Enochian Tablet* series.

These serious occult traditions are joined by her riotously sensual queer aesthetic found particularly in her use of glitter, shiny fabrics, neon paint and Mardi Gras type trinkets scattered across her canvases. Her playful, glittery surfaces lend a sense of rhythm and movement - evoking hedonistic dance moves under pulsating strobe lights on the disco floor. This brings to mind another avenue of Sparks' artistic practice which is performance. There she utilizes dance, music, and theatrical costumes and sets to propel the audience into an alternate magical sense of time and space. Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt is the residing queer elder influence here with his subversive use of tinfoil and other cheap materials in works that often resemble lost props for Jack Smith films. Harry Smith's candy pattern films, Joan Snyder's “stroke” paintings, and even the Surrealist

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Claude Cahun's queer *mis-en-scenes* haunt the periphery of Spark's vision, encouraging her from *beyond* to push boundaries.

Sparks includes in this exhibition what she calls a "chaos" painting, a term she uses to designate a final work that incorporates all of the residue from her studio process in creating the eight woven works. Like the great Alan Shields, this painting's intricate surface celebrates psychedelic color and an unconventional use of materials usually associated with textiles (and feminine labor). An explosive and beautiful "mess," this work most importantly references Sparks' engagement with chaos magick. A contemporary branch of magic, it allows for the idiosyncratic borrowing across myriad traditions (magical, religious, philosophical and popular) as an arsenal for the practitioner to effect whatever change they want in the world around them. Sparks is a perfect representative of this, an artist whose work is designed, both ritually and visually, to effect transformation.

Laurel Sparks, (USA, born 1972 in Phoenix, AZ), received her BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and Tufts University in Boston, MA (1995), and her MFA from Milton Avery Graduate School of Art at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2004). Sparks has held solo exhibitions at Tin Works, Bozeman MT (2023); Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY (2018, 2015); Barbara Walters Gallery, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY (2016); Esoterico Collective, Brooklyn, NY (2014); Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA (2012); Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA (2012, 2009, 2007); and 443 PAS, New York, NY (2011). Sparks' work has been exhibited at venues including Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art at Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA; Elizabeth Foundation Gallery, New York, NY; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA; and Art in General, New York, NY. She currently lives and works between Brooklyn and Rhinebeck, NY.

^[1] Elizabeth Otto's 2019 book *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics* (MIT Press) greatly influenced the artist.